

Homer and the Epic

The banquet is over and the fire has collapsed to a bed of embers. Amid bursts of laughter and boisterous conversation, serving maids clear the remains of bread and meat from the long wooden table. A dog prowls among the seats in search of scraps, and a bird drops from the rafters to snatch a crust on the floor.

From his place at the head of the table, the lord of the hall signals to a man holding a stringed instrument and sitting apart from the others. Taking his cue, the musician stands up and plucks a few notes close to his ear while the guests shift their attention and slowly cease their talk. Then he begins to sing.

Chanting rhythmically, occasionally touching the strings of his lyre, he sings of gods, heroes, and monsters; of love, war, travel, death, and homecoming.

A stillness settles upon the hall; even the dog, now motionless on the hearth, falls under the spell. The singer of tales is working his magic.

Since the earliest forms of civilization, people have been curious about the past. Who made us? we wonder. How did we get here? Who were the heroes of the old days? What can we learn from our ancestors? Today we reach for a history book, switch on the TV, or summon instant information to the computer screen. But electronic technology—and even books—have been available only in the relatively recent past. Throughout most of human history—for the thousands of years before the invention of writing—people stored knowledge in their minds and passed information down to future generations orally, relating it over and over again.

Not everyone, of course, was equally talented at remembering and repeating the tales of long ago. But in every society there were individuals with a gift for storytelling. In ancient Greece, these artists composed poems and chanted them to a musical accompaniment. In this way, classic Greek tales, told as poetry, were kept alive and constantly re-created, until some were

recorded in writing. Of the few poets from ancient Greece whose names we still know today, one of the greatest was a man known simply as Homer.

Homer and His Times

There are lingering uncertainties about who Homer was and what part of Greece he was from. What we do know for certain is that his works include two of the earliest surviving epic poems: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

A book illustration depicts Homer reciting one of his epic poems.



Hercules fighting Cerberus, the monstrous three-headed dog that guards the entrance to Hades. 530–525 B.C. Terra-cotta. Louvre Museum, Paris.

Although the precise dates are uncertain, most experts believe that Homer composed and recited his poems before the eighth century B.C.: that is, over 2,700 years ago, before the year 700 B.C. This was the period when speakers of Greek were developing an alphabet and learning the benefits of recording things on a kind of paper called papyrus. It was a time when Greece was emerging from an age of illiteracy and political confusion. Yet, in those days, people were still accustomed to hearing, rather than reading, their literature.

Subjects and Sources

Homer's poetic tales describe famous people and events from history as well as from legends, myths, and folktales—characters and events that people had been describing for centuries. What Homer added to these portraits, facts, and fictions included his insights into human experience, his imaginative plots, and his expert storytelling style.

Homer's audience was fascinated by tales of the Mycenaean era of 500 years earlier: it seemed like a golden age. Through the mists of time, everything back then seemed bigger or greater. People said the huge stones of ruined Mycenaean walls had been toppled by a race of giants, known as the Cyclopes. People thought palaces had been grander and cities larger in those days; that men had been braver, women more alluring, and monsters more terrifying. Those were the days, they thought, when people struggled against impossible odds with extraordinary—even superhuman—courage, brains, and strength.

The tales of Homer and his fellow poets suggest that they were as fascinated by Mycenaean heroes as their audiences were.



Sometimes their heroes triumphed; sometimes they came crashing magnificently down. But whether a hero won or lost, the tale as a whole uplifted the human spirit. Hearing about the lives of heroes made audiences feel inspired.

Homer's repertoire probably included hundreds of tales by the time he was a mature artist. Audiences would call for certain ones—the “action-adventure” stories of the day—again and again: the legends of Theseus and of Jason, the twelve labors of Hercules, and the many love affairs of Zeus. But Homer's audiences weren't, like modern ones, accustomed to action and adventure stories on television. They believed the stories were true.

Homer's Compositions

How did Homer compose his poems? In some ways, he was like a jazz musician who starts with a well-known tune and plays different variations of it every time he performs. Just as a musician plays to a steady rhythm, so Homer had a steady rhythm in his words. The Greek singers recited their poems so that long syllables and short syllables alternated in a regular pattern.

Composing poetry in front of an audience without hesitating or “drawing a blank” may sound like an impossible task, but the fact that

Literature FOCUS

Homer performed to a rhythm simplified the job. It meant that certain phrases worked better than others because they would fit rhythmically into a line of poetry. So Homer used them again and again. When describing people or things, he often used verbal “formulas.” For example, he repeatedly refers to the goddess Athena as “gray-eyed Athena,” and mentions Dawn’s “fingertips of rose.”

Homer would also recycle longer passages of description. These passages often concerned routine actions, such as a character’s way of entering a room, putting on his armor, going to bed, or saying good-bye to his host.

His use of repetition helped both Homer and his audience. The poet did not have to memorize or make up every word. Most of his story was a little different each time it was told, but the repeated phrases remained like handles for the poet to grip. Homer’s audience looked forward to these repetitions, as listeners look forward to the repeated chorus of a song.

Epic Poetry

Homer’s most famous compositions, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, have been read for centuries as **epic poems**. Since Homer’s day, epic poetry has been considered a genre, or type of literature, just as nonfiction, fiction, and drama are genres.

The epic poem has the following main characteristics:

- It is a long narrative poem.
- The speaker is a narrator, telling a story.
- The theme or subject of the tale is important.
- The setting is huge. It may be a sea, a region, the world, or a universe.
- There is a main character, who is, or is capable of being, a hero.
- The action includes extraordinary or superhuman deeds. Typically, the epic hero has a

goal and has embarked upon a long journey. In this journey, he struggles with natural and supernatural obstacles and antagonists—gods, monsters, and other humans—which test his bravery, wits, and battle skills.

- Gods or supernatural beings take a part, or an interest, in the action.
- The purpose of an epic poem is not only to entertain, but to teach and inspire the listener or reader with examples of how people can strive and succeed against great odds.

Epic Narration

An epic poem is narrated in predictable ways:

- In an invocation, the poet-narrator starts the poem by stating the tale’s subject and asking for poetic inspiration from a guiding spirit.
- The narrator begins telling the tale in the “middle of things,” describing what is happening after certain important events have already occurred.
- The narrative includes speeches by principal characters—including gods and antagonists of the epic hero—which reveal their personalities.
- The narrative’s tone and style are formal rather than conversational.
- The use of figurative language makes the narrative vivid and exciting for listeners and readers.

The epic you are about to read, the *Odyssey*, is a celebration of the human spirit and of ordinary life. It is for this timeless appeal to our common humanity that the *Odyssey* is still read and enjoyed nearly three thousand years after its creation.

ACTIVITY

As you read the *Odyssey*, identify the elements of epic poetry and epic narration listed on this page.